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**Trumping Tropes with Joke(r)s:
The Daily Show “Plays the Race Card”**

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Published in the *Western Journal of Communication*

This is the author's manuscript of the article published in final edited form as:

Gilbert, Christopher J., and Rossing, Jonathan P. (2013). Trumping Tropes with Joke(r)s: *The Daily Show* “Plays the Race Card.” *Western Journal of Communication*, 77(1): 92–111.

Abstract

The race card is at once a trope and a topic that reductively prefigures racial meaning and performance. As a trope, it frames most racial discourse as a cheat or violation and thus prevents deliberation over material realities of race. As a topic, it exists as a resource for diminishing the social and political significance of persistent racial problems. We argue that *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart (TDS)* deploys political humor as a troping device that disrupts the contradictory logics of race card rhetoric and disorders a range of reductive commonplaces and figures of racial discourses. Specifically, we maintain that *TDS* pushes the boundaries of everyday negotiations of race, performs alternative conventions, and models manners of thinking, speaking, and acting useful for contemporary understandings of race. This essay therefore enhances the contemporary body of scholarship on politics and humor while expanding upon analyses of the rhetoricity of race and race relations.

Key Words: political humor, race and racism, race card, tropes, *The Daily Show*

Trumping Tropes with Joke(r)s: *The Daily Show* “Plays the Race Card”

“Why can’t we have a conversation about race in this country?” Comedian Jon Stewart posed this question to correspondent Wyatt Cynac in a skit from *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* (TDS) entitled, “Conversations About Race.” “We are,” Cynac replies. “It goes like this: ‘You’re a racist.’ ‘*You are!*’” (Stewart & Albanese, 2010, 0:30–0:40). Cynac’s shift from whether or not we talk about race to *how* we do so is telling. The question is not whether we talk about race. We do. For all that people attempt to avoid or disavow race, its pervasiveness in public discourse is undeniably apparent (Flores & Moon, 2002; Flores, Moon, & Nakayama, 2006; Grano & Zagacki, 2011; Joseph, 2009; Lacy & Ono, 2011; Orbe & Drummond, 2009; Squires, 2011). The issue at stake is how it is discussed, specifically in terms of dominant figures of speech and argumentative patterns. Public discourses on race feature limited “analytical dexterity” for addressing the “cultural intricacy” of racial tropes and topics. Instead, “Americans increasingly fall back on the comfort of social conventions, even as those conventions are becoming unhinged” (Hartigan, 2010, p. 25).

The “race card” exemplifies the kind of reductive figure and racial argument that hinders productive discourse on race. To begin with, it belies a host of racial ideologies, histories, power relationships, and emotions. For people who would rather not “see” race or wish to avoid discussions thereof, the race card exists as a resource for devaluing the social significance of race and treating any mention of it as trivial and antithetical to a postracial society. Paradoxically, in instances when the allegation attempts to squelch racial discourse, it sparks considerable debate over the salience of race. The race card also refers to subtle and coded racial exclusion or oppression; it flags an improper or perhaps undetectable introduction of race into public discourse. Of course, the allegation of playing the race card easily folds on the person flagging

coded racism when “common sense” rules that race supposedly has nothing to do with the interactions at hand. The race card is, then, a trope, metonymizing discourses on race to rule violations while disavowing material realities of racial meaning-making practices. The race card reduces racial discourses to individualized back-and-forth games of bluffing and calling bluff. Efforts to dismiss race through recriminating charges of “playing the race card” reinscribe a more problematic, inveterate racial consciousness. Those who relegate racial discourse to the periphery or negate it outright nevertheless confront the centrality of race. This tension between dismissing and animating race has gained new prominence since the 2008 presidential campaign and election. President Obama’s inauguration fueled hopes for a new postracial society and, for many, signaled the end of racism in America. However, enduring problems of race-relations have only intensified alongside a renewed significance to the trope of the “race card.”

Amidst the contingencies and complexities of race, “where texts, intentions, and contexts are nearly always in dispute,” we require alternative discursive tactics that refigure dominant racial tropes (Lee & Morin, 2009, p. 377). What follows is an attempt to animate political humor as a site of tropological invention that problematizes dominant racial discourses. A tropological lens proves valuable because tropes “can reveal dimensions of a text that may not otherwise be noticed” (Brummett, 2010, p. x). Humor, in particular, has a unique rhetorical license to interrogate the presupposed in political discourse. Contemporary political humor is celebrated for its capacity to liberate politics from its uncivil, untruthful, or unreflective discursive shackles (Achter, 2008; Baumgartner & Morris, 2007; Baym, 2010; Day, 2011; Gray, Jones, & Thompson, 2009; Hariman, 2008; Jones, 2010). Furthermore, when racial discourse has been strained or silenced in education, politics, and news media, racial humor has consistently provided critical commentary. Consider its deep history in comedic cultural critique, time and

again introducing race-consciousness where racial silence persisted and complicating reductive racial frames. Much so called racial comedy has its roots in the civil rights movement, wherein comedians such as Dick Gregory, Godfrey Cambridge, and others did not simply adorn their routines with discussions of racial tensions but rather figured them center stage. Perhaps more importantly, these comedic forbearers helped to bring arguments against race and racism, not to mention performances of blackness, into the mainstream (Haggins, 2007; Watkins, 1994).

Today, comedians such as the late Richard Pryor, Margaret Cho, Dave Chapelle, or even Stephen Colbert carry on a tradition of racial comedy that is as much about provocation as civic education. *TDS*, we argue, offers a particularly illustrative case study for understanding rhetorical possibilities of political humor in relation to impoverished racial discourse.

It is widely held that *TDS* “illustrates through satire and irony the harm posed by news norms,” which tend to exacerbate social and political differences (Young, 2007, p. 245). The literature on *TDS* examines the show as an exemplar of the blurred lines between comedy, news, and journalism (Baym, 2005, 2010; Hess, 2011), “political culture jamming” (Warner, 2007), the confluence of entertainment and political engagement (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Jones, 2010), of critiquing “whiteness” (Purtle & Steffensmeier, 2011), of preserving critical publics via satirical dissent (Day, 2011), and so on. We assert, specifically, that *TDS* troubles the controversies that constitute racial injustice and complicates racial discourse in an avowedly post-racial era. We urge consideration of the ways in which *TDS* problematizes racial tropes: *TDS* deploys political humor as a troping device that disorders reductive patterns of racial discourse and crafts better stories about racial constructions. Put simply, *TDS* trumps the trope of “playing the race card.” *TDS* critically reveals alternative conventions for navigating everyday negotiations of race that move beyond dismissive and reductive race card accusations. We

conclude that *TDS* models a transfigurable (transformable via figuration) and transportable (conveyable beyond the confines of the television program) way of thinking, speaking, and acting necessitated by the contingencies of race and political strategies of postracialism.

Race as Trope and Topic

Rhetorical scholars have long been interested in the figurative power of tropes. Indeed, Nietzsche's sense that "all words are tropes in themselves" has become somewhat of an aphorism of rhetoric (Blair, 1983, p. 107). So, too, has the notion of troping as a figural revision of literal language. Tropes are, by nature, complicated—and yet straightforward. They are a vehicle of knowledge production and also a feint of literal meaning (Emden, 2005). As figures that condition understanding and organize human conduct, they derive their rhetorical force from both the fragility and stability of meaning (Nothstine, 1988). Giambattista Vico (1996) suggested it is their cultural situatedness that gives tropes their consequence as ways of seeing, thinking, speaking, and acting. Tropes are not only verbal simplifications for rhetorical effect; they are loci of invention. To trope is to play on or with words, to turn meaning (Brummett, 2010). They concurrently define and *redefine*, imagine and *reimagine*. That is, tropes at once rigidly encapsulate meaning and also enable discursive flexibility. Tropes enable transfigurations by virtue of their interaction in overlapping discourses and contexts. Tropes are, therefore, symbolic stomping grounds for working in and through language, turning it on itself, and exploiting its cumulative power as well as its incompleteness.

Tropes also function as *topoi*, or topics: categories, premises, places, and spaces of figuration that encompass conditions of possibility for rhetorical action and discovery (D'Angelo, 1987). According to Richard A. Lanham (1993), topics are "performed arguments, phrases, [or] discrete chunks of verbal boilerplate, which can be...cut, pasted, and repeated at

will” (p. 40). Topics are not simply argumentative signposts, but guarantors of “truth,” sites of reasoning, and “cluster[s] of commonplaces,” all tempered by cultural experience and knowledge (Nothstine, 1988, p. 153; see also, Leff, 1983; Vico, 1996; Wallace, 1972). Hence our understanding of tropes as rhetorical stores or commonplaces that become common spaces of invention. Speech and action typically operate in these spaces and places without question and conform to particular typologies of socio-political discourse (De Certeau, 1984). Following Hayden White (1978), a trope “*constitutes* the objects which it pretends only to describe realistically and to analyze objectively” (p. 2). Taken for granted, tropes function simultaneously as objective (identifiable, locatable, observable) ways of organizing discourse and as subjective positions and attitudes. Given inventive license, they can resist discursive stagnation and reorient meaning, rendering a common discursive place “a region of productive uncertainty” (Miller, 2000, p. 141).

In sum, tropes fragment as much as they form reality. As rhetorical figures, they create what they name in the very process of sorting out meaning. This idea is central for Vico (1996), who posited tropes in general and metaphor in particular as proper sites for comprehending and performing signification. Tropes, according to Vico, function on “similitude,” signifying likeness where there might otherwise be difference. For Vico, “constrict[ion] into one word” or phrase contributes to “the fullness, the majesty, and the clarity”—plainly, the “truth”—of speech (p. 139). As we animate below, similitude is an important concept for comedic critique. Yet we should keep in mind the fact that tropes also (re)situate and (re)organize discursive orders as they participate in “games of truth” (Foucault, 1990, p. 7). As they constrict they also simplify historical discourses and contexts, rigidifying “truths” as cultural knowledge through repetition. This knowledge carries ideological content that influences perceptions of self, others, and

society. To our detriment, we enable the sedimentation of tropes in speech and psyche; to our benefit, we refigure what they render unquestioned.

Race exemplifies the relationship between tropes, topics, and “games of truth.” As a trope, race metonymically groups people and marks difference by mapping meaning onto observable, phenotypic traits. Many scholars have masterfully explained race as a tropical fiction, a social construction, a trick of language that originates from scientific discourse, legal doctrine, common sense reasoning, and popular culture (Gates, 1992; Gilroy, 1993; Gilroy 2000; Hall, 1992; Hall 1997; López, 2006). Enduring caricatures such as the “coon,” “mammie,” “sapphire,” “buck,” and so on exemplify the way language inscribes meaning on racialized bodies (Bogle, 2001; Harris-Perry, 2011; Jackson, 2006). Like all tropes, race creates meaning, orders our discourse, and powerfully influences our thoughts, feelings, and attitudes. Consequently, race also becomes a topic that provides taken for granted patterns of discourse and argument to which people turn to make sense of culture, politics, and more. In short, race is a discursive topic on which much turns. Consider the frequency with which people call on race, racism, racial (in)justice, or the race card to make sense of civic interactions. Lisa A. Flores (2003), for example, illustrated the operation of racial tropes in shaping attitudes toward immigrants. Thomas K. Nakayama (1994) described the intersections of racial tropes with other powerful constructions such as gender and masculinity. When these tropes stabilize and become naturalized in public discourse, the dangers of occlusion, not to mention oppression, become amplified. Yet, because tropes are constructed through discursive practices, racial constrictions can also be seen as unstable, impermanent, and imprecise. Through interrogating these tropes, we can invent new patterns to enable different imaginaries.

Practices of “playing the race card” provide an illustrative case study for race as a trope and topic. The “race card” is, first, a metaphor that frequently signifies the strategic introduction of race—implicitly or explicitly, warranted or unwarranted—into public discourse. It appeared prominently in post-civil rights U.S. society, particularly amidst the anxieties of multiculturalism in the 1990s. Now it is marked by fallacious hopes in postracialism. People today are often accused of “playing the race card” explicitly when accusing a person or institution of racism, or when claiming racial injury. For example, in August 2011, pundits and analysts chastised Democratic congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee for playing the race card when she suggested that racial animus motivated the persistent impasse between a GOP controlled Congress and the Obama administration. Perhaps more notoriously, attorney Johnnie Cochrane allegedly played the race card during the O.J. Simpson trial in 1995 when he introduced the LA police department’s history of racism. Then again, so did his accusers when they publicized resentment amongst the white populace. In these cases, the metaphor presents racial discourse as a “trump” card that boldly attempts to “win a hand.” “Playing the race card” also refers to insinuations or coded references that may signify race, but are meant to be undetectable as “racial,” such as “urban,” “welfare,” or “inner city” (Gilens, 1996; Lee & Morin, 2009). Political “conservatives” are often said to play on race either to trivialize racial discourse or to provoke white voters through implicit racial fears (Mendelberg, 2001). Here, the metaphor treats racial discourse more like an ace up the sleeve or a stacked deck: hidden, yet powerfully influential. In June 2011, Bill O’Reilly described presidential hopeful Tim Pawlenty, a white male, as politically “invisible,” and likened him to “vanilla.” Pawlenty later mocked: “Is he playing the race card on me?” Pawlenty’s joke both deflects the salience of race and mocks race consciousness. The magic of

the race card in these instances is its ability to disappear the existence or introduction of anything “racial.”

The race card also serves as a metonym for social conflict, reductively framing discourses of race as adversarial and competitive. Each manifestation of the race card—however multifaceted in its use—tends to construct a zero-sum game of racial politics wherein discrete, competing racial groups scramble to avoid losses and maximize gains (Ford, 2009). Consequently, accusations of playing the race card represent arguments for the validity or propriety of racial discourse. People are often accused of playing the race card when nonracial variables appear more plausible than allegations of racism, rendering the metaphor a bluff or cheat. The “cheat” might refer to the mention of explicit or subtle racism that causes racial suffering (Neubeck & Cazenave, 2001; Williams, 2001). However, the “cheat” also refers to fabricated allegations of racism in which an accuser conjures racial animus for the sake of social and political gain (Ford, 2009). Similarly, it can be viewed as a penalty committed by political “liberals” who enact racism through their insistent race consciousness (Collier & Horowitz, 1997). In each case, invoking race represents an attempt to game the system in order to gain unfair advantage or unduly penalize another. The race card invokes a postracial belief that introducing race violates accepted cultural rules. Despite its varied situational applications, this tropical argument has become so commonplace that it narrowly flags any racial discourse as a wild card played out of turn and out of context, and it frames arguments based on race as racist, regardless of the warrants of such claims. Ironically, the accusation of playing the race card itself serves as an argumentative trump that attempts to shut down deliberation and consideration of racism and privilege, shifting attention away from racial grievances.

The consequences of this gaming metaphor as racial argument are many. In every case, the race card trope performs the “same work as topical argument but does it in a more comprehensive and efficient manner” (Leff, 1983, p. 226). Accusations of “playing the race card” reduce the complexity of social identity to race. People play race as one would play a suit in a card game: clubs and hearts, white and black. This frame implicitly naturalizes race as a stable identity marker and category of association, rather than recognizing its malleability. The result is a collective tendency to react as if race has unchangeable meanings that defy situational nuances. This tendency, as John T. Warren (2001) argued, appears as a “social drama”—as a performative construction of racial identities that emerges out of and is maintained by the repetition of “meaningful” acts. “Playing the race card” signals the devolution of this drama into a bad “melodrama,” whereby race relations become a Cliff notes version of complex cultural narratives (Williams, 2001). Concern arises when figured meanings become literalized. Such instances are explicit when the race card is used to dismiss racial discourse and direct attention away from legitimate concerns over social injustices and exclusions. As race becomes unmentionable or unquestioned racial constructions gain potency in their naturalness. Race itself is then reduced to a trick that paradoxically disrupts and thwarts an imaginary stasis of racial justice.

These consequences necessitate a corrective for the ways people deploy the race card as an accusatory, dismissive, and silencing trope. The solution for correcting reified racial tropes is not to deconstruct and throw them away as if they could be suddenly devoid of meaning. Racial tropes are grounded in consequential, material, indeed literal realities. They are situated in space and time, placed in and constructed by the contingencies of complex socio-political contexts. Nor is the solution to simply expose them; revelation cannot be an end in itself. It is essential to

recognize and act against the exploitative structures and cultural conditions that remain in place even after the figures and constructions are revealed. Political humor is an important site for *reconstructive* interventions in the contemporary problematic of race relations. Below we outline ways in which *TDS* exists as a common place wherein political humor trumps racial tropes.

***The Daily Show* as Metatropological**

The political humor of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart (TDS)* focuses critical attention on racial tropes and models more imaginative ways of thinking, speaking, and acting about race than those epitomized by discourses of “playing the race card.” *TDS* is metatropological in that it places tropes that have hardened in meaning and become inflexible in unfamiliar contexts so as to articulate new meanings and explode discursive simplifications. *TDS* uses humor, and specifically irony, to refigure the trope of “playing the race card.” White (1973) argued that irony is metatropological “for it is deployed in the self-conscious awareness of the possible misuse of figurative language. [...] It points to the potential foolishness of linguistic characterizations of reality as much as to the absurdity of the belief it parodies” (p. 37). Following Kenneth Burke (1969), irony involves not simply a juxtaposition of opposites but also an interaction of their terms. Therefore, irony enacts what Burke (1984) called “perspective by incongruity” (p. 308)—the activity of looking into and through disagreement, incoherence, and even absurdity, or, in White’s terms, moving from metaphoric constructions, through their metonymic and synecdochic constrictions, and into fields of ironic uncertainty. Jon Stewart and his correspondents do as much when they complicate naturalized racial tropes and misuses of the “race card” by challenging both their situation in public discourse and their participation in reductive ways of thinking, speaking, and acting. We chart two distinct ways in which *TDS* complicates the trope and topic of race: contextualization and literalization.

Contextualization

When the trope of “playing the race card” rigidly confines public discourse on race and racism Stewart and his correspondents creatively contextualize racial events so as to argue for more complex constructions. *TDS* complicates “playing the race card” as an argumentative commonplace by disrupting deeply held, common sense beliefs about race and revealing racial formations that resist reduction and erasure. This metatropological project draws attention to dangerously static meanings and complicates seemingly straightforward racial incidents. Contextualization, then, becomes a mode of (re)situating a cultural problematic in a way that invites audiences to shift their focus and revise common patterns of racial meaning-making.

One way *TDS* critiques the precariousness of racial discourses is to ridicule its game-playing logic, which “presupposes the knowledge and application of codes...*relative to types of situations*” (De Certeau, 1984, p. 21). Consider the central question posed by Stewart in response to a supposed “race war” that developed in debates around the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination: “Who played the race card?” (Stewart & Albanese, 2008a, 1:14–1:33). The question is familiar and expected, given our conventions of accusation, blame, and the assumption that one can observe objective racial phenomena with distinct sides, or teams of racial players. In this instance, the conflict pitted Senator Hillary Clinton’s campaign (the white team) against then-Senator Barack Obama’s campaign (the black team). Did the Clinton campaign play the race card by using what appeared to be coded racial language and insinuations to malign Obama’s candidacy, thereby attempting to cheat the game of race? Or did the Obama campaign “play the race card” by raising the specter of race inappropriately, thereby playing race out of turn and out of context? Stewart began by playing on the notion that people of color are instigators of unwarranted racial conflicts. Said Stewart: “Was it the black guy?” However, following his set-

up, a montage featured news anchors and political pundits raising the issue of race. Clip after clip from popular news media exposed race as a sieve through which political debate is (con)strained. Stewart removed the trope from the antagonistic and limited contexts of Clinton versus Obama, coded racism versus unwarranted accusations, or more simply white versus black. Instead, he contextualized the question “Who played the race card?” within the media’s reductive convergence on race. Moreover, Stewart troubled narrow news frames and hackneyed forms of finger-pointing politics that restrict possibilities for understanding the fluid dynamics of race. The political humor of *TDS* therefore redeployed the trope so as to invite new ways to make sense of race and ginned up racial controversy. Playing the race card is the media’s job, Stewart asserted.

In a skit entitled, “Playing the Race Card,” Stewart troubled another context which supports the intelligibility of “playing the race card”: specifically the “postracial” society and the post-race era that President Obama’s victory allegedly inaugurated. Stewart began, “Barack Obama’s election was seen as heralding a new era in race relations” (Stewart & Albanese, 2009c, 0:00–0:44). He foregrounded the belief in a new, progressive cultural landscape where race presumably exists only on the distant horizon and has little import in our contemporary setting. Stewart turned to correspondent Larry Wilmore for an update on this progress, and Wilmore immediately flipped the script: “You wouldn’t *believe* what white people are starting to do,” said Wilmore. They turned to a video clip of Glenn Beck on *Fox News* followed by an audio clip of Rush Limbaugh, both of which feature the conservative pundits decrying President Obama for racism. Wilmore exclaimed, “Did you see that? He’s playing the race card!” This contextualizing move clouds the dawn of a radiant postracial day. The belief that racial thinking is outdated supports accusations that someone—typically a person of color—is “playing the race card.” The

implication is that they have played out of turn and do not understand the contemporary rules of civic engagement where race has no place on the table. Wilmore, however, outed white people as race-conscious racial agents: in this case Beck and Limbaugh who attempt to claim an historically inaccessible and untenable racial victim status. Racism, as Beck and Limbaugh avowed, is reversed in “Obama’s America.” Their laments undermine the postracial context and expose a deeply held race-consciousness that fuels a perceived loss of social and political privilege.

Convention suggests that Wilmore’s identification of “playing the race card” would lead to chastising the inappropriate and unjustified claims about (reverse) racism. However, Wilmore further complicated earnest invocations of postracialism when he encouraged Beck’s and Limbaugh’s behavior and offered advice on how to improve it (Stewart & Albanese, 2009b, 1:10–2:15). To begin, Beck is shown declaring Obama’s racism (“this President has a deep-seated hatred for white people”) then equivocating on his own position (“I’m not saying that he doesn’t like white people”). Wilmore’s first tip: “Don’t back down. You can’t just play the race card then take it back because it sounded *stupid*. Once you play it, don’t take it back. Where do you think the word ‘renege’ came from?” Stewart clarified, “So you’re saying to white people: If you’re going to play the race card, *be bold!* Play it boldly!” Second, an audio clip detailed Limbaugh’s mordant complaint: “Just return the white students to their rightful place—their own bus, with bars on the windows and armed guards. They’re racists! They get what they deserve.” Wilmore’s tip: “You can’t play the race card sarcastically! You will get your ass in trouble.” He mockingly illustrated his point: “Oh, officer, good thing you pulled me over. I’m a dangerous black man. I might get crack strength and then you’ll have to tase me.”

Wilmore's advice once again refuted a postracial consciousness and, instead, affirmed boldness in bringing race to the table. Stewart's summarizing words—"play it boldly" (Stewart & Albanese, 2009b, 1:45)—evoked the power of the race card as a trump and, in the context of feigned injustice, boldness certainly loses its merit. Yet the admonishment to play race boldly seems to suggest that when the topic of racial injustice is broached it should be done without apology. Wilmore also rejected the context of reverse racism, a corollary to postracialism, by slyly reintroducing historical and contemporary circumstances of racism. This is perhaps most obvious when Wilmore extended the race card's game metaphor and suggested a crude etymology for the word "renege," playing off the homonymic relationship to the familiar epithet (1:36). Furthermore, when Wilmore mocked Limbaugh's complaint, he both challenged Limbaugh's implication of institutionalized, state-sanctioned racism and violence against white people and reminded the audience that these conditions remain a reality for people of color. In both instances, Wilmore displaced the "race card" from conventional contexts that enable the trope to dismiss, trivialize, and restrict racial discourse. He refigured the trope to identify white racial agency and consciousness. Then he deployed it to promote ongoing public discourse on race.

Stewart and Wilmore indicated that the often narrow presumptions of who plays race and how it is played need to change. They pointed to ways in which playing the race card establishes a context of racial conflict that appears more stable than it actually is. *TDS* treats race, racial identities, and racism not as static constants but as "places or sites in discourse that serve as the beginnings of new discourses, none of which can close off the production of still more discourse" (Wess, 1996, p. 173). When Stewart summarized, "Playing the race card is a fraught landscape," he called attention to the contested terrain of the problem of race (Stewart &

Albanese, 2009b, 2:18–2:20). He also tempered the ironic edge, to borrow Linda Hutcheon's (1994) term, of his and Wilmore's critique, hedging his own obvious, even if comedically veiled, provocations and Wilmore's incisive juxtapositions with more familiar, rather innocuous quips. The topics of their analysis illustrated that multiple players can "play the race card" in its many guises across multiple contexts. Rather than allowing this trope to stifle racial discourse, *TDS* trumped the trope to promote and produce alternative perspectives.

Stewart and Wilmore once again confronted constrained discursive practices following the arrest of Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates on suspicion of breaking into his own home. Stewart's introduction to the story is laden with sarcasm: "A mere six months after electing Barack Obama, thereby healing all of our country's racial wounds, we find, surprisingly enough, the scab picked open once more ... A racial-tension-free six months now sullied by Henry Louis-Gate" (Stewart & Albanese, 2009a, 0:30–1:16). Stewart punned on Gates' last name to draw attention to a commonplace of public discourse: reducing social controversies to a simplistic metonym—the suffix "-gate." The punning continued as Stewart returned to game metaphors that characterize much racial discourse. "Our country had been pitching a no-hater," Stewart claimed. He invoked a highly celebrated feat in baseball, so rare that the loss of the "no-hater" implies the country has simply returned to the status quo. The supposed postracial moment was fleeting indeed. Stewart continued: "Now we have to reset the sign." The sign is an ironic depiction of an Occupational Safety and Health Administration factory floor "scoreboard" that reads, "We have gone 191 days without racial tension." The number 191 dissolves into a zero, signaling the end of a "winning" streak of sorts, or a period of time without injury, for the nation. Together these introductory tropes exposed and mocked the practice of sensationalized racial narratives. At times the media celebrates grand victories (i.e. President Obama's election), which

glamorize and exaggerate progress toward racial justice. In other cases, devastating, defeating controversies (i.e. Gates' arrest) signify isolated and jarring breaks from the norm of racial equity and harmony. Lost within these frames are the norms that sustain oppression.

Stewart spurred the controversy on with the familiar query, "But who's to blame?" (Stewart & Albanese, 2009a, 1:18–2:12). He purposefully perverted stereotypes by exaggerating a commonplace of racial controversy. Is it, Stewart intoned in an elite tenor, the "erudite, African-American Harvard professor, or," with a clichéd Boston accent, "the hahd-wurkin', bahk bay pahlice officah?" "The answer," said Stewart, "will shock you." In an absurd reversal, President Obama, the heralded racial redeemer, became the instigator after suggesting that the Cambridge Police acted "stupidly." Consequently, a story about race that Stewart claimed "would have disappeared back in America's vast storehouse of either racist or apparently jock-on-nerd incidents" turned into Obama's "Cuban missile crisis." Stewart's analogy with near-nuclear conflict indicts sensationalized media coverage. Each anticipates war in the launch (fight starter, conversation stopper) of a missile (words, too, are weapons). The analogy revealed the media's treatment of racial conflict as a condition demanding alert systems and threat levels at worst, imbalanced postures of power and politics at best. The reaction to Obama's statement simply reaffirmed customary games of truth for racial discourse that result in reductive ways of making sense of race.

However, rather than allowing this frame to stand, Wilmore mocked the narrow parameters of racial performances linked to the "race card" metaphor. Wilmore claimed that "Skip" Gates was ecstatic at being a victim of oppression. As a distinguished black studies professor Gates spent his entire life merely *talking* about racism, Wilmore alleged, but "finally, the professor gets to play the race card" (Stewart & Albanese, 2009b. 0:10–1:49). Stewart played

along: “Gates was excited to finally feel oppressed? I mean, surely that’s not the first time he’s experienced...” Wilmore then detailed Gates’ privileged positions as a Harvard faculty member who vacations on Martha’s Vineyard. His punctuating evidence is a comical photograph of Gates riding a large tricycle: “Does this man look oppressed to you?” Wilmore’s question is important. Not only does it refuse to acknowledge the (il)legitimacy of playing the race card, but it also delimits who can and cannot play it. Gates, Wilmore suggested, is not oppressed enough, is not an eligible victim of either racism or racial profiling. Such license is only available to those who fit particular standards of socio-economic status and/or stereotypes of black experience. Moreover, the media became the final judge and jury, which renders Gates’ claim potentially specious. When Gates presumed to be a victim and, in Wilmore’s words, devolved into the irate “Blacky Mc’Black,” he was two-faced. “I mean, for God’s sake,” Wilmore asserted, “they call him Skip.” When the arresting officer asked him outside and Gates purportedly responded, “Yeah, I’ll speak with your mama outside,” he spoke out of place. “Your Mama?” Wilmore exclaimed. “How many decades has he been holding that in? Oh my, did he call him a jive turkey, too?”

Under cover of political humor, it is difficult to ascertain the point of Stewart and Wilmore’s exchange. Is it a critique of the Gates incident being coded as racial? Are they validating the belief that Gates was “bluffing”? Perhaps Wilmore wished to suggest that the race card *was*, in fact, played inappropriately and deployed as a device for obtaining justice where justice already exists. Or does their commentary trouble systemic and cultural racism that motivated both the incident and many of the resulting narratives? This ambiguity is precisely the point of *TDS*’s metatropological intervention and it exemplifies *TDS*’s complication of contexts. It problematizes the idea that race relations move simply from clear-cut spectacles to easily

(pre)fabricated resolutions. It reveals as incomplete the narrative of racial profiling or the roles of “racist cop” and an “oppressed minority.” *TDS* situated race card rhetoric in the context of its discursive totality—one that, like any other, is “shot through with contradiction” (Hariman, 2008, p. 259). Stewart concluded, “certainly the discussion of this incident shows that it’s gonna take a little more than one black president to flush the system clean” (Stewart & Albanese, 2009a, 4:47–4:53). The problem, as Stewart and Wilmore presented it, is that “the system” of racial tropes as topics has long been clogged. The only certainty appears to be a mockery of the effort to recode such racial incidents as superficial “teachable moments.” Stewart asked: “What lessons can we as a society draw from this?” “That’s easy, Jon,” replies Wilmore. “Don’t forget your fucking keys” (Stewart & Albanese, 2009b, 3:05–3:17).

Oscillation

Although *TDS* disrupts “the race card” through complicating contextualizations, it is not enough simply to create fault lines in familiar racial constructions. Productive movement toward racial justice requires sensitivity toward social structures that condition race consciousness even after tropes have been turned. *TDS* holds both the constructedness of race and the consequences of those constructions in dual focus. Here, we draw on Richard Lanham’s (1993, 2003) notion that rhetorically savvy actors learn, through devices such as pun and irony, to oscillate between looking at language self-consciously and looking through language to act and intervene in the referential worlds it creates. *TDS*’s treatment of the race card models this alternation between the surfaces and the material, political realities underlying the complexity of the trope. *TDS* draws attention to the surfaces of insufficient racial discourses and refigures them in ways that reveal the possibilities of tropological invention in reshaping racial meaning. In other words, it

exemplifies sophisticated oscillation “from contemplating the surface of human behavior to taking a role in it” (Lanham, 1993, p. 189).

TDS draws audiences into reflective engagements with racial tropes and topics through hyperbolic extensions of the “race card” metaphor and its corollary, race and identity conflict as games. In January 2008, for example, media hype surrounding the presidential primaries was consumed with what Stewart called “America’s favorite fight starter: race” (Stewart & Albanese, 2008a, 0:07–0:13). After suggesting that everyone wanted to know “Who played the race card?” Stewart drew explicit attention to the limiting gaming constructions with two unfamiliar metaphors. “[Who] rolled the race dice? Juggled the race balls?” (1:26–1:32) In another segment Stewart emphasized the gaming trope by equating identity politics and a card game. He mocked the media’s shock at seeing the “race card played so closely on the heels of all those other cards” (Stewart & Albanese, 2008b, 4:16–4:19). *TDS* featured a series of clips invoking the “change card,” the “populist card,” the “fear card,” the “patriotism card,” the “gender card,” the “woman as victim card,” the “class card,” and others. Stewart quipped, “What is this, cribbage?” This tropical exaggeration refigures narrow frames that encapsulate political conduct and identity coordination as a means for scoring socio-political points. These extensions of “playing the race card” wrestle a commonplace metaphor into unfamiliar, even ridiculous, usage. *TDS* made racial constructions visible with a “playfully critical distortion of the familiar” that render common sense racial tropes “foolish, harmful, or affected” (Feinberg, 1967, p. 15-16; Hodgart, 1969, p. 33). Stewart turned the imagery of the trope against itself, inviting audiences to oscillate between the surfaces of language choices and constructions, and the effects of those common tropes and argumentative frames. The inventive, unexpected metaphors force reflection on the wisdom of treating racial discourse as a game of chance, skill, and amusement.

TDS also encourages oscillation between racial tropes and their consequences by literalizing the “race card” trope. In one sequence correspondent Larry Wilmore employed a series of card tricks that exposed “playing the race card” as a verbal sleight-of-hand which cunningly diminishes productive discussions of race (Stewart & Albanese, 2009c, 2:52–4:20). To animate the ways in which unreflexive uses of “the race card” circumvent public discourses on race, Wilmore fanned a deck of cards and, explaining that “the race card has to surprise people,” he produced an ace of spades, seemingly out of nowhere. Wilmore placed the ace-as-race-card in the middle of the deck and shuffled. “Once it’s out, Jon, you’ve got to control it ... it’s a powerful card,” he warned. Such an admonishment suggests how frequently race breaks into public discourse, despite strong efforts to silence and avoid it. “They can try to bury [race] in the middle of the deck and repress it, but it just comes back to the top.” He flipped the top card on the deck to reveal the ace of spades. His “they” is notably ambiguous, and therefore encompasses multiple meanings of the trope, from the postracial advocates who seek to banish all instances of race-consciousness to those who wish to deny coded racism and institutional oppression. Even presumably non-racial topics, represented by a five of diamonds, can unexpectedly burst with racial significance. With sleight of hand, Wilmore transformed the five of diamonds into the ace of spades, framing the race card as a verbal trick that sets in motion discursive forces that are difficult to constrain. But the quality of the ensuing discourses is another matter. The sketch concluded with a warning against the race card, or any such reductive trope: “Once anyone plays the race card, every card is going to look like the race card.” Wilmore overturned card after card, making each appear as the ace of spades. “Until, after a while, just like that, be careful, because every card will look like a jackass.” Fanning the series of cards—once aces—he displayed four jacks.

The magic sequence exposed the consequences of racial tropes that become commonplace: “Once [a verbal trick is] invisible, the artifice of the social order becomes invisible as well, and begins to seem natural” (Hyde, 1998, p. 170). An established perspective is most dangerous when it becomes unquestioned, and public culture is not adept at reflecting on race as a trope or “playing the race card” as a rhetorical argument. To our detriment, we neglect the ability to reflect on the use of racial tropes, and thus deploy them unwisely and unreflexively in public discourse. Without careful attention to racial language and meanings created through public discourse, we lose our facility to intervene appropriately and justly in social conflict and risk becoming “jackasses.”

The magic trick sequence also provided a means for conceptualizing how racial tropes, many of which have become oppressively rigid and monologic, might be used disruptively in order to challenge the status quo. Borrowing from Kendall Phillips’ (2006) discussion of rhetorical maneuvers, literalization should be understood as a “calculated action determined by the multiplicity of possible” tropological meanings (p. 321). It carries “disruptive potential” as it articulates alternative meanings and uses for tropes and topics. *TDS* posits alternatives that render inadequate, stultifying racial formations such as the race card unintelligible, if not nonsensical. This “turning or twisting ... against the defined contours” of meaning troubles power relations and, “in that subsequent twisting, creates the potential for a transformation or reversal of those power relations” (p. 326). Trumping the trope, *TDS* disrupts commonplaces that maintain racial order, while working both through and against the “games” of “truth” from which they derive.

Racial injustices and tensions stand to be overcome only when common public discourse accommodates and reproduces multiple viewpoints. Stewart’s exaggerations, alongside

Wilmore's card tricks and verbal games, invite audiences to oscillate attention between language and its material effects. As Stewart amplified the game metaphor, he also revealed the rhetorical promise inherent to our symbolic resources. As Wilmore literalized the race card, he also analogized the constructive role of troping—drawing attention to the artistry and illusion of racial tropes, while producing tangible outcomes represented by an inexorable ace. Together, Stewart and Wilmore modeled reflexive uses of language and appealed to cultivate a racial discourse that can hold in fertile tension multiple perspectives on racial meaning and action.

Wild Cards

We conclude, first, with some caveats. It is plausible that “the reliance of *both* racism and comedy on stereotypes means that comedy is more likely to reinforce rather than challenge” injurious race relations (Weedon, 2000, p. 263). *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart (TDS)*, in playing games (literally and figuratively) with serious racial problems, could be seen as reducing race relations to a game. However, as we have shown, a great deal of racial discourse *is already reduced*. *TDS* plays by the rules of the game (metaphor) specifically in order to break them, and this by highlighting the ways in which troping is not a way out of political action but is itself political action. Therefore, against assertions that *TDS*'s brand of political humor cultivates cynicism and political disengagement, we contend that *TDS* provides tools that enable healthy political engagement (see Bennett, 2007; Hariman, 2007; Hart & Hartelius, 2007). One could also charge that Stewart, by virtue of his racial, gender, and class privilege, merely defers and jests the risks associated in racial critique. Comic predecessors such as Dick Gregory, Godfrey Cambridge, and Richard Pryor risked their careers, their socio-political standing, and even their lives to voice their comic critiques; Stewart risks popularity and ratings. What both *TDS* and a lineage of racial comics seem to animate, however, is that our participation in racial discourse

embodies a *shared* risk. Culture itself is a shared experience, however divergent its constituent cultural histories seem to be. So, too, are our collective tropological and topical experiences of race.

There is also risk in celebrating *TDS*, and comedic spaces more generally, as principle sites for problematizing race. First, to laud Stewart as a unique critic of race risks painting him as a white savior figure—a leader rather than an ally—without questioning his privilege. He becomes the imperial comic who empowers and enables his correspondents to speak, a relationship which reaffirms customary power relations. This risk is enhanced by the relative scarcity of comedians of color in popular political satire. We do not wish to displace or diminish the contributions of marginalized comedians, who in many ways created the conditions of possibility for *TDS*'s humor. Yet, we also recognize the frequency with which Stewart and his correspondents engage in polyvocal, cooperative criticism. Second, to extol a comedic space as *the* space for productive racial conversation and critique poses a problematic paradox. On one hand, humor gains sanction to say what cannot or will not be said elsewhere. Stewart and his correspondents exploit this rhetorical license in order to complicate uninterrogated racial tropes. On the other hand, comedic space easily becomes the site in which we lift prohibitions and safely engage in difficult critiques. This becomes prohibitive when such critiques may not occur in other spaces. Humor might then become the way into critiques of race, from which there is no way out. We argue, however, that this paradox only holds as long as we conceive of the comedic space as necessarily disconnected from other civic spaces, rather than as imbricated in civic action.

Comedy can also be called a form of escapism—a means to postpone action. Satirical commentators like Stewart and Wilmore are thus good, not because they speak to their skeptics,

but because they preach to their choirs (Day, 2011). This is no doubt why Vico (1996) questioned the cultural efficacy of “amusing sayings.” We grant that political comedy is often comforting, even if abrasive and provocative. Yet, as we have argued, the ironic tactics of contextualization and literalization on *TDS* strive to discomfit even the show’s most devout devotees. Hence why we have focused in particular on those moments in which familiarity is overtly disrupted. Advocating multiple viewpoints and contexts, *TDS* removes what Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) called the “hierarchical ornamentation” of the dominant discourse and reminds audiences that “all there is to know about the world is not exhausted by a particular discourse about it” (p. 23–24, 45–46). Diane Davis (2000) echoed Bakhtin’s observations explaining how comedy “proliferates meaning rather than fixating it” (p. 72). Comic discourse allows citizens “to hear the excess that gets drowned out, sacrificed for the clarity of One voice, One call, One legitimate position” (p. 18–19). *TDS* should therefore be upheld for its power to expose the taken for granted in discourse and to complicate reductive racial tropes.

Tropes such as “playing the race card,” “colorblindness,” “reverse racism,” and others, have become commonplaces of reasoning that stultify public discourse on race. Such reductive and restrictive tropes are incapable of containing the complexity of race even while they constrict it, and so create impasses to movement toward realizations of racial justice. *TDS* imaginatively refigures tropes of race to reveal the instability of meaning, while showing the lasting and literal consequences of figural language. *TDS* specifically turns the trope of “playing the race card” on itself, demonstrating how it functions differently across cultural contexts and on different bodies. Stewart and his correspondents expose tropes as wild cards: as jokers, of sorts, characterized by user discretion. Writing on Thoth, the god of writing and arbiter of truth, Jacques Derrida (1991) commented on the image and idea of the wild card:

In distinguishing himself from his opposite, Thoth also imitates it, becomes its sign and representative, obeys it and *conforms* to it, replaces it, by violence if need be. He is thus the father's other, the father, and the subversive moment of replacement ... He cannot be assigned a fixed spot in the play of differences. Sly, slippery, and masked, an intriguer and a card, like Hermes, he is neither king nor jack, but rather a sort of *joker*, a floating signifier, a wild card, one who puts play into play (p. 122).

Derrida's anecdote is not only about writing; it is about troping. It is also not a conception of the wild card as mere chance, as frivolity, or as subversion for its own sake. Derrida animated the stakes, power, and possibilities in playing with our most potent cultural tropes. Changing the rules in racialized games of truth requires challenging the seemingly necessary and natural discursive relations constituted by and constitutive of its rhetorical constructions—to, in Derrida's terms, do figurative “violence” to that which perpetuates insidious ways of thinking, speaking, and acting. Rhetorical critics must manipulate existing tropes and operate within the spaces and realities they have constructed to effect change. This type of troping enables critics as participants to “write and revise, in a continuing alteration” (Lanham, 2003, p. 207). In other words, we enact “provocation[s] of the word by the word” in the interest of rousing new civic imaginations (Bakhtin, quoted in Fogel, 1989, p. 188).

In this essay we sought to identify alternative discursive maneuvers that challenge dominant, naturalized racial constructions and complement the work of critical communication scholars. We argued that *TDS* is a critical resource, modeling ways of speaking, thinking, and acting that might move U.S. public culture positively, even if humorously, toward more just racial discourses. *TDS* does not free us from racial tropes; it does, however, point the way toward better understandings of them. We believe the promise of *TDS*'s rhetorical intervention resides in

the possibility of promoting more complex civic imaginations and revising racial meaning and practices. Robert Hariman (2008) following Bakhtin posited public discourse as a system (an “immense novel”) of diverse languages, whereby the public functions as “audience and author and [is] known by omnipresent participation in the system rather than the authority of any one form of address” (p. 259). *TDS* showcases our roles as storytellers in this “immense novel,” reminding us that we are all implicated in reductive stories about race. We must reject naturalized tropes but we cannot escape tropological discourse. We are therefore all charged with and capable of devising richer tales. *TDS* offers a launching pad for potential revisions and reconstructions. The skits and bits performed on *TDS* provoke critical imagination that can be applied in other contexts within the larger cultural dialogue. When we presume to know how things operate, political humor serves as a wild card: at once revealing the constructedness of the rules while often creating new ones. Both old and new constructions remain open to challenge and revision in the next moment. Still, as Wayne Booth (1978) suggested, despite the indeterminacy of tropes, it is necessary to ask: “Which are the good ones?” (p. 54). We as rhetorical critics are compelled to continually ask this question while we remain on the lookout for constructive instances in which that question is answered.

When rigid tropes thwart social progress, political humor can create possibilities for moving forward. Of course, the political humor in *TDS* is not the cure-all for racial vexations: it is one component of a multi-faceted treatment plan, one discourse amidst a much larger discursive system. It is precisely in this sense that we understand the race card as transfigurable and political humor as transportable. That is, the question is not simply what the race card is or what political humor can do, but what we, as scholars, educators, and critics can do once cracks appear in our rhetorical constructions. For our part, viewing *TDS* as a model for alternative ways

of thinking, speaking, and acting empowers public audiences to new forms of cultural engagement. We understand *TDS* as a forum for civic training, not a recourse to social or political action. This is not to say that all criticism should be humorous or that political humor is the only constructive intervention in contemporary politics. It is to say that *TDS* reimagines and refigures the troubling, static moments of racial discourse, and carefully reflects on (in)visible social relations and meanings. Trumping as re-tropeing may therefore lead to more just interactions beyond comedic spaces.

Notes

1. Race has long been a prominent topic of discussion in *TDS*: from a mockumentary entitled, “RACE: The Afrospanicindioasianization of America” in 2006 through an investigative report entitled, “Bird Like Me,” on environmental racism in Mississippi in 2011, and much more.

2. On July 16, 2009, police responded to a 9-1-1 call indicating burglary when a passerby witnessed Gates “breaking in” to his Cambridge home after he forgot his keys. His exchange with responding officers resulted in an arrest for disorderly conduct, and the incident quickly garnered accusations of racial profiling. Sergeant James Crowley, the arresting officer, denied such accusations, his precinct issued a statement of regret (though Crowley refused to apologize), and the charges on Gates were dropped.

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